Preface

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The Possibility of Language: A discussion of the nature of language, with implications for human and machine translation
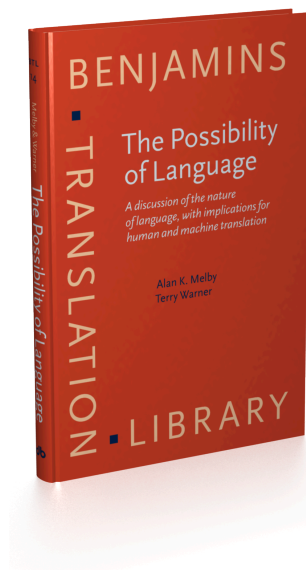
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Preface

It is not the purpose of this book to replace a general introduction to machine translation, such as Hutchins and Somers (1992) or Arnold et al. (1994), nor to replace a general introduction to translation theory. Rather, it is to explore the "open questions" of machine translation. In the preface to Hutchins and Somers (1992), Martin Kay comments on the status and future of machine translation:

> Certainly, even when applied to texts on very limited subjects by authors with no literary pretensions, machine translation still generally produces results that would not be acceptable from a human translator under any circumstances. Just what would improve the quality of the result, and even whether any substantial improvement is possible, are open questions.... [The authors] clearly both have opinions on the open questions of machine translation, but they are not the subject of this book.

We attempt to address these open issues by examining the intellectual tradition of mainstream linguistics and philosophy and to identify why this tradition has failed to provide an adequate theoretical framework for some of the goals of machine translation. In the course of this investigation, we present an alternative view of how human language is possible. We then trace some of the implications of this view for the shape of translation theories, the practice of human translation, and the future of translation technology, including both machine translation and computer-based tools for human translators.

If this book is convincing or even just troubling, the interested reader can go on to consult publications on machine translation (with ammunition to perform a careful analysis of assumptions), publications on translation theory (again, to look for underlying assumptions about language), or writings in philosophy (to explore the original sources mentioned in chapter 4). We hope that some readers will be so intrigued by the topic that they will choose to investigate what makes human language possible and how such an understanding can be applied.

Depending on the background of the reader, some of the material in chapters 1 (which includes a brief introduction to human translation) and 2

(which includes a brief introduction to machine translation) can be covered quickly. However, the arguments in chapters 3 ("The Wall") and 4 ("Possibilities") should be new to everyone except those who have read our recent papers.

We recognize that the title of this book could have been *The Limits of Machine Translation*. Only chapter 4 deals directly with the question of why language as a tool for communication between humans is possible without relying on the assumptions, which we will call *objectivism*, underlying mainstream linguistics. However, we hope that our exploration of the possibility of language is worth further effort by ourselves and others. We dismiss radical relativism as a basis for explaining human communication because it excludes any grounding of our concepts in reality. We also reject objectivism as a basis for explaining dynamic general language. We are therefore obliged to present a third alternative. One of many unfinished tasks for us is to further examine approaches to language that claim to handle dynamic metaphor to see if they have completely abandoned objectivism. We invite dialogue with colleagues.

Apologies are given in advance for the bias toward French examples. The first author is a French-English translator. Some readers will also be uncomfortable with the use of personal pronouns. Sometimes, when the first-person plural is used in this book, it is Melby and Warner, but other times 'we' is used to avoid the more formal third-person singular 'one' and to alternate with the informal 'I'. Though I (Melby) as first author take responsibility for everything in the book, including errors that certainly remain, I happily share that responsibility with Warner for the parts on which we collaborated.

A few further notes on style are in order. Bold is used to mark the first use of a term that is defined in the glossary at the end of the book. This book is unashamedly and unavoidably American in some respects of which I am aware (such as the references to Generative Grammar as mainstream linguistics), and in many respects of which I am not aware, because they are still invisible to me. However, some stylebook details are intentionally British, such as the placement of punctuation relative to quotations and conventions of number ('type of apple' versus 'type of apples'), which I find more logical than American usage. I am told my attempts at humor are neither British nor American, being more akin to Alien.

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